

Stuffing the turkey and other Thanksgiving food-safety mistakes

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(PhysOrg.com) -- What would a Thanksgiving turkey be without its stuffing, and what better place for that stuffing than inside the turkey? Despite the tradition involved, a food-safety specialist in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences says some practices are worth reconsidering, especially since Mom may not have fully appreciated the risk of foodborne illness.

"Cooking a stuffed turkey is riskier than cooking an unstuffed one, because it takes longer for the stuffing to reach the proper internal temperature of 165 degrees F when it is placed into the cavity of the bird," said Martin Bucknavage, [food safety](#) specialist in the department of [food science](#). "While people concern themselves about cooking the bird to 165 degrees F, they must ensure that stuffing also achieves that temperature."

Bucknavage noted that often the turkey ends up overcooked in getting the stuffing to the proper temperature, or the stuffing ends up undercooked because the turkey is removed from the oven when the bird is at the right temperature, but the stuffing is not.

"It is the undercooked stuffing that poses the real risk," he said.

"Bacterial pathogens such as [Salmonella](#) may be present in the cavity of the bird and can contaminate the stuffing. If the stuffing is not cooked thoroughly, Salmonella can survive and may infect those who consume it."

If you want a properly cooked, stuffed bird with less chance of foodborne illness, Bucknavage said, just cook your stuffing separately. To preserve a family tradition, stuff your fully cooked bird with the cooked stuffing before serving. If you simply must stuff your bird before cooking, take extra care to ensure the internal temperature of both the bird and the stuffing exceeds 165 degrees F before serving.

Another common practice that Bucknavage discourages is washing the outside surface of your store-purchased bird.

"The problem with this practice is that pathogenic bacteria often are embedded in the surface of the skin," he said. "When faucet water hits bacterial pathogens, they become aerosolized and land all over your kitchen counter, the faucet and you.

"The U.S. Food and Drug Administration says *Campylobacter* is one of the most common causes of diarrheal illness in the country, and undoubtedly, many of these cases are a result of cross-contamination in the kitchen. So there is no need to wash the outside of your bird -- the cooking process easily will kill these bacteria. But you still need to clean and sanitize your counter and any kitchen equipment that touches the raw bird."

Lastly, although Mom may have thawed that frozen bird on the counter overnight, this method has been shown to help increase the amount of pathogenic bacteria that might be present on the raw turkey. Rather, you can use one of three methods:

--Thaw in the refrigerator. "You should allow about 24 hours for every five pounds of turkey in a refrigerator set at 40 degrees F or below," he said. "Be sure to place the frozen turkey, breast side down, in the original wrapper in a container to prevent raw fluids from dripping on other foods. A 16-pound turkey will require three and a half days of

refrigerated thaw time."

--Thaw under cold water. Submerge the wrapped turkey in cold tap water in a leak-proof plastic bag to prevent cross-contamination and to prevent excess pick-up of moisture. Allow 30 minutes per pound, and change the water every 30 minutes until the turkey is thawed.

--Thaw in your microwave. "You can do this if your microwave is large enough," Bucknavage said. "Follow the manufacturer's instructions, and be sure to [cook](#) the bird immediately once you've thawed it this way.

"Mother won't mind if you change a thing or two if it means keeping this generation's food safe," Bucknavage said.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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